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Avoiding a Korean Calamity

Why Resolving the Dispute with Pyongyang Requires Keeping the Peace

By Doug Bandow

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

President Trump has repeatedly threatened to attack North Korea. Prior to the announcement in March of a prospective summit between President Trump and Kim Jong-un, policymakers were becoming increasingly convinced that war was a serious possibility. However, there is no military solution to the Korean crisis at an acceptable cost and risk.

The Kim regime has tested both nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. North Korean officials have long contended that America's "hostile policy" required such a capability and insisted Pyongyang would never negotiate away its deterrent.

Now South Korean officials say that Kim is ready to denuclearize. Even if true, the security guarantees he reportedly expects may be more than the administration is prepared to grant. A hastily pulled together summit based on differing expectations could produce a clash and push the president back to his militarily aggressive strategy. If diplomacy is seen to fail, war could become more likely.

War, however, offers no guarantee of effective denuclearization. The United States likely does not know the location of all of the North's nuclear facilities; even if it did, many targets may be buried too deep to reach. Moreover, military action risks a full-scale regional conflagration.

Kim could see even a limited military action as a prelude to attempted regime change. North Korea has the conventional capability to wreak destruction on Seoul. Use of weapons of mass destruction could, in worst-case scenarios, result in millions of casualties.

Kim appears to be seeking nuclear weapons to deter America. The greatest danger of war is not that Pyongyang would deliberately initiate nuclear war, but that U.S. policy convinces Pyongyang an American attack is imminent, thus tempting the North to strike preemptively. U.S. conventional superiority might pressure the North Koreans to "use it or lose it."

The Trump administration should formalize diplomatic channels to Pyongyang to defuse tensions and explore nonmilitary alternatives. In pressing for tougher action against North Korea, Washington should address China's interests. If and when tensions ease, the Trump administration should begin a process of military disengagement, turning defense responsibilities over to South Korea and its neighbors and withdrawing military forces, which entangle the United States and provide North Korea with American targets. Should a diplomatic resolution remain deadlocked, Washington should consider accepting South Korea's development of its own deterrent.

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INTRODUCTION

North Korea has challenged the United States and destabilized Northeast Asia since its creation in 1948. Emerging from the Soviet Union's post–World War II occupation zone, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) attempted to forcibly reunite the peninsula in 1950, triggering the Korean War. What began as a civil war drew in the United States and sundry allies, as well as China, and even, though less fully, the Soviet Union.

Although the conflict was nominally "limited"—the Truman administration rejected proposals to use nuclear weapons—the consequences were horrendous. Battle deaths alone exceeded 1.2 million; even more civilians likely died.[1] Much of the peninsula was ravaged by ground combat and repeated bombing. As American troops prepared to extirpate the North Korean regime, the People's Republic of China (PRC) intervened. The conflict became an entirely new war, ending with the combatants back near the original boundary.

On October 1, 1953, the United States signed the Mutual Defense Treaty with the Republic of Korea (ROK), backed by a garrison that remains to this day. At that time, the ROK could not survive without American military support. However, the balance of power gradually shifted. In the 1960s, the South's economy began to grow at an impressive pace. Today, South Korea fields a capable military.[2] It is better trained than the North's and equipped with superior and more modern weapons. Moreover, the ROK enjoys roughly 45 times the GDP of the North.[3] Add to that twice the population, extensive diplomatic and economic relations with the outside world, and a vast technological edge, and the ROK has the means to defeat North Korea militarily.

The collapse of the Soviet Union left the United States as the globe's unrivaled military leader. China's relationship with both America and North Korea also changed. While the PRC and Washington remain at odds on a number of important issues, the former no longer sees America's presence on the Korean Peninsula as posing an existential threat, in contrast to 1950.

Today, Beijing is not interested in going to war for the North or against the United States. The PRC has warned the DPRK that China would not back its nominal ally if the latter started a conflict. It is not clear how Beijing would react if the United States initiated war, as it has deliberately kept its policy ambiguous.[4] Most analysts doubt that the PRC would intervene militarily on behalf of Pyongyang even if Washington started the conflict, though Beijing might act to contain the consequences, perhaps using force to secure a rump buffer state in the north of the peninsula.

Since the end of the Cold War, the two Koreas have been locked in a cold war of their own, which has occasionally flared hot. A quarter century ago, the DPRK's nuclear weapons program became a source of growing concern. Over the years, Washington attempted both engagement and isolation, buttressed by threats of war, to dissuade Pyongyang from moving forward. However, the nuclear development program that was largely a symbolic exercise under founder Kim Il-sung became a practical reality under his grandson, Kim Jong-un. The North is soon likely to possess the ability to target the American homeland with nuclear weapons.

That is a worrying thought, but Pyongyang's intention is almost certainly defensive. Nuclear weapons serve several objectives. For instance, they yield international status and bolster the military's prestige. Most importantly, though, nuclear weapons are the ultimate deterrent. The DPRK lacks reliable friends while facing a coalition led by the world's military superpower, which in recent years has initiated regime change against several vulnerable governments. Most strikingly, Washington made a deal with Libya's Muammar el-Qaddafi to eliminate the latter's missile and nuclear programs before ousting him.

North Korea has repeatedly insisted that it will never negotiate away its nuclear arsenal. Few U.S. analysts believe otherwise. However, in bilateral discussions with South Korea in March, Pyongyang reportedly claimed it would consider denuclearization only if the

United States "eliminated" the "military threat to the North."[5] There is little agreement as to what that might entail from the North Korean perspective. For its part, the Trump administration insisted it would not negotiate unless Pyongyang first surrendered on the essential issue and agreed to abandon its nuclear weapons. Only sticks were on the table. The announcement in March of a possible summit between the two leaders left unsaid which set of presumptions, if either, would prevail.

The administration is still pushing for tougher sanctions. Additional and more intensive economic penalties would damage the DPRK's economy and the well-being of its citizens, but are unlikely to change Pyongyang's course. After all, a half-million or more North Koreans died of starvation in the late 1990s, with no discernible impact on official policy.[6] Nor is China likely to impose the trade embargo sought by Washington absent meaningful U.S. concessions to Beijing.

Until the dramatic announcement of a planned Trump-Kim meeting, the administration appeared to believe it had a choice either to accept a nuclear DPRK or launch a preventive war. President Trump then suggested he would choose the second rather than allow Pyongyang to gain the ability to hit the United States. "Denuclearization is [the North's] only acceptable future," the president declared in September 2017.[7]

The ever-hawkish Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), who reportedly talks regularly with President Trump, predicted in December 2017 that the chances of war were 30 percent—and would rise to 70 percent if the North were to conduct another nuclear test.[8] Even more worrying, in January 2018 the administration dropped its appointment of Victor Cha, who had served as director of Asian affairs in George W. Bush's National Security Council, as ambassador to the ROK because he opposed military action.[9]

In December and January, sensationalist media reports fomented public concern, even near hysteria, in Hawaii, exacerbated by the false warning that an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) was headed toward the islands.[10] A majority of Americans say they back military strikes against North Korea, at least if other strategies fail to halt its nuclear program.[11] A recent Quinnipiac University poll found that nearly half of Republicans support preventive war.[12]

The risk of war would be high if only one country were represented by a blustering, impetuous, and unpredictable leader. The risk is far greater when both nations suffer under such leadership.[13] One shudders at the thought of adding today's *mano a mano* personal insults to the tenser moments of the Cold War, such as the Berlin airlift or the Cuban missile crisis. Contributing to the tension, in March Trump fired Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster as national security adviser and picked former United Nations ambassador John Bolton, an extreme hawk who argued for preventive war against North Korea in February 2018, as his replacement.[14] Assessing the likelihood of war is impossible with any precision, but until the recent South Korea-North Korea discussions that led to the summit proposal, Washington policymakers appeared to view an American attack as a possible and even reasonable option.[15] Bolton is on record as saying President Trump should use the summit as an opportunity to deliver an ultimatum to Kim and refuse to negotiate a compromise arrangement, making military action in the aftermath of failed talks that much more attractive.[16]

Although hope is widespread that a successful summit could lead to a denuclearization agreement, there is a significant chance the meeting will never occur, or that if it does it will end in failure. The administration would then be likely to declare diplomacy a dead option and return to its highly confrontational strategy, including the threat of preventive strikes.

Unfortunately, almost any U.S. military action would likely trigger full-scale war. The resulting conventional combat alone would transcend any of America's recent conflicts, including the Iraq War. The impact could expand far outside Korea's borders, reaching China, Russia, Japan, and beyond. In initiating

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military conflict, Washington would be triggering the very war it has spent more than six decades trying to prevent.

War should be a last resort, reserved for preempting an imminent threat of attack. Otherwise, Washington should adopt a mix of negotiation, deterrence, containment, and disengagement to address the North's challenge. The lack of a single, simple "silver bullet" is unfortunate, but it reflects the complexity of the North Korea problem. Ultimately, the most important objective should be to preserve peace, however tenuous, on the Korean Peninsula and prevent any conflict that might occur from spreading to the North's neighbors and the United States.

NORTH KOREA'S DESIRE FOR DETERRENCE

North Korea is essentially friendless. Pyongyang's enemies, most importantly, the United States and the ROK, are growing ever more powerful. Washington also became far more militarily aggressive in the aftermath of the Cold War. The United States has regularly engaged in regime-change wars, for example in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, and in a range of other significant military actions, including in Bosnia, Serbia, and Somalia, and against the Islamic State.

The DPRK has long had a substantial conventional deterrent capability, with thousands of artillery pieces and abundant missiles targeting Seoul, which sits roughly 35 miles south of the North-South border, or the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Nevertheless, the overall conventional military balance continues to shift against the North. Under these conditions, further destabilization is possible. U.S. officials could come to believe they are capable of suppressing North Korean fire against Seoul, or Washington could decide that advancing America's security outweighed whatever damage might be done to the South. In either case, deterrence would fail, leaving the United States free to attack, whether to take out the North's missiles and nuclear weapons, decapitate North Korea's leadership, or undertake even broader operations.

In August, then-secretary of state Rex Tillerson tried to allay Pyongyang's fears by stating that the administration was not seeking regime change.[17] However, his comments were hardly reassuring. For one thing, President Trump publicly undercut Secretary Tillerson numerous times on matters of diplomacy, tweeting in October that Tillerson's attempts to negotiate with Pyongyang were a waste of time.[18]

Even if Pyongyang believed the secretary or other U.S. officials spoke for President Trump despite his dismissive treatment of them, it could not count on this or future administrations living up to such promises. The president repudiated the nuclear nonproliferation agreement with Iran negotiated by the Obama administration, and American intervention in Libya offered a particularly dramatic example of Washington's cynicism: after pocketing the Qaddafi regime's missile and nuclear concessions, U.S. and European officials initiated regime change when Tripoli faced a rebel uprising. Qaddafi suffered a particularly gruesome and painful death. At the time, Pyongyang noted that it would never make the same mistake.[19]

In short, any nation in as vulnerable a position as the DPRK would likely desire a more effective deterrent against America. The North could never obtain enough conventional weapons to match its superpower enemy, but nuclear weapons are the great equalizer. Even the hawkish Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations observed, "There is nothing to indicate that Kim Jong-un is suicidal or even expansionist; he is simply building nuclear weapons to ensure the survival of the regime."[20] Boot dismissed fears that Pyongyang cannot be deterred: despite possessing nuclear weapons, Kim has not used them.[21] Neither his father nor grandfather reignited the Korean War in another attempt at coercive reunification. That the regime is evil does not mean it is irrational or suicidal.

Nuclear weapons offer several benefits for

North Korea. The DPRK gains status: otherwise, why would nations pay the slightest attention to the isolated, desperately poor, and virulently hostile regime? Nuclear weapons also may be a tool for extortion. Rivals may offer aid in an attempt to calm a nuclear power that appears bent on brinkmanship. Even more important, the missile and nuclear programs reward North Korea's armed services, helping to cement the military leadership's loyalty to the Kim dynasty.

Most fundamentally, though, nuclear weapons are the best military deterrent. They compensate for conventional weakness and therefore can prevent even a global superpower like the United States from taking advantage of its overwhelming strength. North Korea is not the first nation to see nukes this way. China insulated itself from Soviet and U.S. attack by developing nuclear weapons. Israel's unacknowledged nuclear arsenal eliminated the possibility of another concerted conventional attack by its neighbors. Pakistan's arsenal deters a far stronger India from striking. Nuclear weapons are the only military realm in which Russia competes equally with America.

The Kim regime is quite explicit in its reasoning, both publicly and privately. When I visited Pyongyang in June, foreign ministry officials said nuclear weapons were necessary because of Washington's "hostile policy," and especially its "military threats" and "nuclear threats."[22] Without question, America's attitude is hostile, and the United States does make military and nuclear threats. Washington justifies this approach as a necessary response to the DPRK's unremitting antagonism toward South Korea, going back to the Korean War.[23] However, particularly in the post–Cold War context, the United States has often militarized its opposition to weak regimes for reasons having nothing to do with defending itself or its allies, resulting in a perverse incentive for proliferation.

Indeed, Pyongyang demonstrates how even paranoids have enemies. In 1994, President Bill Clinton seriously considered military strikes against the North.[24] President George W. Bush lumped the DPRK in with Iran and Iraq as a member of the infamous "axis of evil." He also said he "loathed" Kim Jong-il.[25] U.S. aircraft carriers—an "armada" in Trump-speak—regularly sail around the peninsula and U.S. bombers routinely overfly it. The American and South Korean militaries conduct annual military exercises that Pyongyang finds deeply provocative. President Trump has matched Kim's rhetoric in threatening to unleash "fire and fury" and "destroy North Korea."[26]

In October, Ahn Dong-chun, deputy chairman of North Korea's rubber-stamp parliament, explained that "Our country is being threatened, the very existence of the DPRK is at stake." He added, "Our nuclear programs are nuclear deterrence programs aimed at protecting our independence; we have no choice but to develop our nuclear programs."[27] One can argue that, under the circumstances, the North's supreme leader would be a fool not to develop a reliable nuclear deterrent.

Indeed, knowledgeable Washington officials understand the North's position. Scott W. Bray, national intelligence manager for East Asia in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, stated in June:

> We believe North Korea's strategic objective is the development of a credible nuclear deterrent. Kim Jong-un is committed to development of a long-range nuclear-armed missile capable of posing a direct threat to the continental United States to complement his existing ability to threaten the region. Kim views nuclear weapons as a key component of regime survival and a deterrent against outside threats. Kim probably judges that once he can strike the U.S. mainland, he can deter attacks on his regime and perhaps coerce Washington into policy decisions that benefit Pyongyang and upset regional alliances—possibly even to attempt to press for the removal of U.S. forces from the peninsula.[28]

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Understanding that deterrence is the main motivation behind North Korea's nuclear program is necessary in order to devise appropriate strategies and correct for Washington's tendency to inflate the threat posed by North Korea.

ASSESSING THE NORTH KOREAN THREAT

The world would certainly be a better place if North Korea did not possess nuclear weapons. However, the president mistakenly conflates evil with undeterrable. "We need only look at the depraved character of the North Korean regime to understand the nature of the nuclear threat it could pose to America and our allies," Trump declared in his State of the Union address in January. Yet both Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao Zedong's People's Republic of China were evil and deterrable. Dictators, including Kim Jong-un, usually prioritize self-preservation, which strengthens deterrence.[29]

Proliferation inevitably creates uncertainty and instability. Acquisition of nuclear weapons by a regime that is simultaneously isolated, opaque, authoritarian, brutal, and hostile magnifies the danger. Nevertheless, Supreme Leader Kim is unlikely to start a war with America. Despite the North Korean regime's malevolence, there is no evidence that Kim or anyone under him is suicidal.[30] Kim has devoted extraordinary effort to consolidating his power and enhancing his nation's status. He has demonstrated no interest in departing this earth in a massive radioactive funeral pyre arranged by Washington.

Might Kim believe that his nation could defeat America in a war? Intelligence services report no evidence that he is this disconnected from reality. As noted earlier, deterrence evidently worked against his grandfather and father, neither of whom acted on their many threats against South Korea and the United States.[31] Indeed, his commitment to creating missiles and nuclear weapons suggests cold calculation and a realization that his country lags well behind America in conventional military strength.[32] He almost certainly will not attack the United States unless he sees war as inevitable and believes his country would have the best chance of survival by preempting an American assault.[33]

The North's essentially defensive posture does not mean there is no danger of conflict. The possibilities of mistake and misjudgment are real.[34] However, if President Trump acts responsibly, an admittedly questionable expectation, the likelihood of combat remains low. Kim knows starting a war would end his dynasty.

North Korea's nuclear weapons are a concern for the United States primarily because of Washington's military entanglement in Northeast Asia. Indeed, the most likely consequence of a North Korean nuke is to undermine America's security guarantee of South Korea. If Pyongyang is capable of striking the U.S. homeland, America's commitment to defend South Korea puts U.S. territory at risk. Involvement in even a conventional conflict could go nuclear: if U.S. forces threatened the Kim regime's survival, Pyongyang would have reason to threaten nuclear war.

But alliances are, or at least should be, a means to an end. Namely, they should enhance U.S. security interests. America's military guarantee for the South was initially based on Seoul's weakness; the changing security environment has made this arrangement obsolete. Absent America's involvement, a Korean conflict would be a horrific war but would remain a regional struggle far from U.S. territory. Moreover, the ROK, with a vastly larger economy, bigger population, and a far more extensive network of allies and trading partners, could defend itself. Dropping Washington's promise to go to war on behalf of Seoul actually would make America more secure, reducing its chance of being drawn into other nations' conflicts.

THE MILITARY OPTION: FEASIBILITY AND RISKS OF ESCALATION

Nevertheless, Washington has good reason to want to disarm the North. Defending the

nonproliferation regime has been an important U.S. foreign policy priority for decades. Denuclearizing North Korea would prevent further proliferation by North Korea and limit the potential harm should war break out in Northeast Asia. Taking military action, however, will not serve this interest constructively.

Since the Korean War, Washington has viewed military action as an option, mainly because there are only imperfect solutions to the North Korea problem. Various pundits, analysts, and politicians proposed military action well before Pyongyang possessed much of a missile or nuclear capability. However, decisionmakers have repeatedly concluded that war is a bad option.

In 1969, President Richard Nixon apparently considered ordering a tactical nuclear strike against North Korea in retaliation for the downing of an American plane but quickly dropped the plan.[35] A quarter century ago, when a North Korean nuclear weapon was embryonic, the Clinton administration developed plans for war, but officials appreciated the risk that limited strikes would escalate to full-scale war.[36] South Korean president Kim Young-sam believed only his opposition prevented a second military cataclysm, though Clinton administration officials would later deny conflict was imminent.

In 1994, then-secretary of defense William Perry and assistant secretary of defense Ashton Carter (who later served as President Barack Obama's secretary of defense) prepared plans to destroy the North's Yongbyon facility. They acknowledged, however, that "a strike on Yongbyon, while surgical in and of itself, would hardly be surgical in its overall effect. The likely result of such a strike would be a spasmodic lashing out by North Korea's antiquated, but large and fanatical, military."[37] Robert Gallucci, assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs at the time, said, "I believe it would have resulted almost certainly in war."[38] Retired general Gary Luck, who served as U.S. commander in South Korea during the Clinton administration, believed that "if we pull an Osirak," referring to Israel's 1981 bombing of Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor, "they will be coming south."[39]

The George W. Bush and Obama administrations also eschewed military action.[40] Former national security adviser and secretary of state Condoleezza Rice called the idea "lunacy."[41] Susan E. Rice, who served President Obama both as UN ambassador and national security adviser, warned that President Trump risked "tipping the Korean Peninsula into war." Echoing Condoleezza Rice, she argued that a "decision to start a pre-emptive war on the Korean Peninsula, in the absence of an imminent threat, would be lunacy."[42]

Only a full-scale invasion could permanently end the North Korean threat, but few openly advocate such a drastic course of action. Neither commentators nor policymakers are willing to openly argue for inaugurating general war for that purpose. As was evident in the George W. Bush administration's selling of the Iraq War, Washington knows that wars for regime change need to be viewed as cheap—a "cakewalk," as one former government official put it—to receive popular support.[43] Advocates of U.S. military action have been reluctant to describe a prospective conflict on the Korean Peninsula that way.

Instead, proposals for limited military action to achieve lesser ends are more typical. One possibility is an air or naval blockade.[44] As an act of war, it would be highly provocative, but it would be less dangerous than a direct attack. However, it would have only limited effect, doing nothing to eliminate and little to slow the North's development of nuclear weapons.

Most policy recommendations involve airstrikes targeting North Korean nuclear or missile assets or Kim and the DPRK leadership. The specifics differ and have grown more complex over time. Absent an objective to preempt an immediate existential threat, however, the arguments for a U.S. assault are weak.

The first challenge of a limited military strike is accurately identifying and destroying targets. Much has changed since the Clinton administration considered war in 1994. There

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are more nuclear facilities dispersed throughout the country in a greater number of locations, and many are buried deep underground, protected by bunkers or mountains.[45] The RAND Corporation's Bruce Bennett explained: “There is no such thing as a surgical strike in North Korea” since “we don't really know for sure where all their weapons are.”[46] Even if Washington knew their location, it could not guarantee their destruction. Max Boot comments that anyone imagining a successful “surgical” strike “has been watching too many Jason Bourne movies.”[47]

Moreover, Pyongyang's missile and nuclear capabilities have steadily advanced, including employment of mobile launch systems.[48] The survival of only a few launch vehicles would leave the North with a substantial retaliatory capacity, at least against the ROK and Japan.[49] Newer missiles rely on solid fuel, which renders them less vulnerable. Moreover, the DPRK may have located some weapons and facilities close to its border with China, meaning American military action there could carry high risks of an inadvertent clash with Beijing.[50] Even successful military strikes might only slow Pyongyang's efforts while increasing the incentive to continue its nuclear program. Furthermore, the North would retain its conventional capability for targeting Seoul and other South Korean targets. Only an overwhelming, immediate threat could justify action under such circumstances.

The second difficulty is avoiding a general war, however limited the initial military objective. In theory, the United States could restrict its attacks to missile development and launch facilities, nuclear development activities, military command and control facilities, and political leaders.[51] Washington could then announce that “this is a limited defensive strike on a military target—an operation that poses no threat to civilians—and that America does not intend to bring about regime change,” as University of Texas professor Jeremi Suri proposed.[52] The United States could accompany bombing runs with the promise that it planned no additional military action but would act with overwhelming force in response to North Korean retaliation. According to this argument, a reasonable, rational DPRK leadership would accept the resulting losses, exercise restraint in the face of offensive military attacks, and survive.

However, as Victor Cha asked, “If we believe that Kim is undeterrable without such a strike, how can we also believe that a strike will deter him from responding in kind?” The notion that Kim will not escalate undermines the very premise on which the argument for preventive U.S. military action is based—that Kim is irrational and undeterrable.[53] Moreover, acquiescence might not be the “rational” course for Kim in this scenario. Even if he somehow could be confident that the United States would not seek regime change, his inaction could ignite internal opposition to his rule and threaten his own survival.[54] In fact, it would be difficult for any leader of any government to accept supinely the destruction of the regime's most important military assets acquired at such great effort and expense. The loss of face and increased military vulnerability would create a powerful incentive to retaliate. An attempt to decapitate the regime would be even more threatening and harder to ignore.[55]

Restraint by Pyongyang under these circumstances seems highly unlikely. After all, based on America's previous behavior, the Kim regime would be foolish to accept such reassurances from Washington. Given President Trump's dismissal of negotiations and apparent willingness to toss aside the Iran nuclear deal, faith in the promises of the Trump administration would seem imprudent at best. Anyway, what would matter is not Washington's intentions, but the Kim regime's perceptions.

The North would likely see initial U.S. attacks as an attempt to disable the regime's best weapons and top leadership before launching a more general military effort. Having watched the effectiveness of American arms in Iraq and elsewhere, the North Koreans almost certainly realize that yielding the initiative to Washington would guarantee defeat.

If the Kim government believed an American attack was imminent, the regime would have every reason to use all available weapons and do as much harm as possible. Any effective U.S. military action would require massive preparations of its conventional in-theater forces beforehand. The required buildup and movement would be impossible to conceal, thus serving as a visible signal for Pyongyang to strike first.[56]

Even successful decapitation might not prevent retaliation. In the event of war, North Korean units are supposed to begin firing at Seoul without orders from above.[57] Thae Young-ho, a high-level diplomat who defected in 2016, contends that North Korean commanders "are trained to press the button without any further instructions from the general command" in the event of attack. "Artillery and short-range missiles will fire against South Korea," Young-ho said.[58]

With artillery and Scud missiles, the DPRK forces could bombard Seoul and its environs.[59] The capital is "a massive agglomeration of everything that is important in South Korea," said Robert Kelly of Pusan National University.[60] Nearly 26 million South Koreans, roughly half the ROK's population, live in the Seoul metropolitan area and are therefore within range of North Korean artillery and Scud missiles.[61] Conventional bombardment of Seoul alone could result in tens of thousands of casualties.[62]

Analysts warn that even interception of a North Korean test missile could lead to an unpredictable response from Pyongyang.[63] At the very least, the North would be inclined to retaliate in kind, perhaps by launching a limited strike on, for example, the Yongsan Garrison, the headquarters for the U.S. Army and United States Forces Korea, located in Seoul. (Scheduled for relocation in 2019, the facility is home to about 26,000 Americans, including active-duty soldiers, civilians, and family members.[64]) Other targets, civilian or military, would also be at risk.

It is unclear how effective the DPRK's nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities are. For instance, estimates of the number of artillery pieces, rate of fire, and reliability of munitions are in dispute. Many of the North's artillery can only hit the northern third of Seoul—and the ROK has substantial counterbattery capabilities.[65] Still, former secretary William Perry warned that the North's artillery force is better protected today than in 1994, when he drafted plans for U.S. military strikes. Even then, he argued, North Korean forces "could kill tens of thousands before we could stop them." He added, "The price was very high then, but the price today would be very much higher."[66]

Some analysts foresee several hundred thousand shells per hour hitting the city and predict that only a few hours would be necessary for its destruction.[67] But even an attack of lesser intensity would cause enormous damage.[68] North Korea also could target South Korea's two dozen nuclear power facilities, which could generate substantial nuclear fallout.

Efforts to eliminate the North's artillery and missiles, however effective, would take time, leaving a window during which North Korea could target the country's political, business, and economic centers. Pyongyang's large, mostly antiquated tank fleet would be vulnerable to air attack but still might be capable of reaching Seoul. Finally, the North's possession of an array of chemical and biological weapons could augment any conventional strike.[69] Such weapons could be used to attack Seoul and other South Korean cities. To assume casualties could be minimized would be to play a reckless game of international chicken with hundreds of thousands or even millions of lives.

Possible Chinese involvement would complicate any conflict. Beijing could intervene directly in North Korea's defense against America, at least if the latter attacked the former.[70] However, the PRC has no love for the Kim regime and is unlikely to directly confront the United States militarily because it would risk a major war with a superior power. Nevertheless, Beijing still might attempt to preempt American conquest by intervening before Washington had conquered the North,

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perhaps preserving a rump state and preventing an outcome that would leave U.S. forces on the Yalu River.

Moreover, there is good reason to doubt that Washington could keep to its own limited aims once war breaks out. It is inconceivable that Washington would stop with the restoration of the current border, having once before left a surviving DPRK as unfinished business. Policymakers' desire to forestall any future conflict would be strong.

Conquering North Korea, with its extensive mountainous terrain, also would be bloody and difficult. Without outside support, any insurgency almost certainly would be doomed, but irregular resistance could greatly extend the conflict. Over time, strong powers have won a diminishing share of asymmetric wars.[71] There are numerous recent examples of failure, or at least only partial victory, and at very high cost: Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Burma, Colombia, and Turkey (vs. Kurdish separatists). Each case obviously differs dramatically in its specifics, but all illustrate the folly of assuming a quick and easy victory against North Korean resistance.

The United States could launch a far more aggressive and wide-ranging attack, even using nuclear weapons in its own first strike,[72] or as retaliation for even “one [artillery] round going into Seoul,” in the words of retired general Tom McInerney.[73] But nuclear weapons are no panacea. A seemingly unprovoked, or at least unjustified, nuclear strike would have extraordinary geopolitical implications. Nuclear fallout would likely affect South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia. A war of choice, killing millions of North Koreans, could trigger global political blowback against the United States. Barry Posen, political scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, warned that “the United States would make itself an international pariah for decades, if not centuries,” adding that the nuclear option “should not even be on the table.”[74]

While the United States and its allies might be able to blunt a North Korean conventional assault, the North could use nuclear weapons and other unconventional weapons against U.S. military forces in Japan as well as South Korea.[75] Even worse, Pyongyang could target both Seoul and Tokyo to maximize civilian casualties.

Even U.S. nuclear strikes might not eliminate all of the North's retaliatory capabilities. In that case, the Kim regime would have no reason to hold back any remaining military forces. Mark Bowden of the *Atlantic* warned of retaliation by Pyongyang: “With only a few of its worst weapons, North Korea could, probably within hours, kill millions. This means an American first strike would likely trigger one of the worst mass killings in human history.”[76]

THE CATASTROPHIC COSTS OF WAR

The costs of a war on the Korean Peninsula, even if it remained a purely conventional contest, are widely acknowledged. One would have to look back to the original Korean War for anything comparable. Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said such a conflict would be “horrific,” with “a loss of life unlike any we have experienced in our lifetimes.” Defense secretary James Mattis similarly warned that combat would be “catastrophic” and represent “probably the worst kind of fighting in most people's lifetimes.”[77]

In advocating for the use of force against North Korea, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) admitted that “Japan, South Korea, China would all be in the crosshairs of a war if we started one with North Korea,” but also said, “If there's going to be a war to stop [Kim], it will be over there. If thousands die, they're going to die over there. They're not going to die here. And [President Trump] told me that to my face.”[78] Columnist Ralph Peters was equally dismissive of the lives of others: “Better a million dead North Koreans than a thousand dead Americans.”[79] He left unaddressed what he thinks about the lives of South Koreans, Japanese, and Chinese. The U.S. government's first responsibility is to its own citizens, but it should not ignore the consequences for foreign

populations. In any case, war would result in many dead Americans, as well as foreigners.

Casualty estimates reflect numerous unpredictable factors, since great uncertainties surround any military operation. Although South Korea, backed by the United States, enjoys an enormous military advantage, the North has a quantitative manpower and weapons edge and has invested in asymmetric capabilities.[80] Pyongyang would ultimately lose a conflict, but the war could evolve in unpredictable ways involving special operations forces, forward-deployed conventional arms, and more destructive unconventional, including nuclear, weapons.[81]

Moreover, casualties likely would not be limited to the Korean Peninsula. The DPRK could hit Guam and Japan with missiles and perhaps nuclear weapons. Conflict also could spill over the Chinese and Russian borders. If the belligerents used nuclear weapons, fallout could contaminate surrounding nations. While the worst case is not inevitable, the vagaries of war are unpredictable and most conflicts turn out worse than predicted.

In this case, the forecasts are awful enough. According to a Congressional Research Service report: "Conservative estimates anticipate that in the first hours of a renewed military conflict, North Korean conventional artillery situated along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) could cause tens of thousands of casualties in South Korea," where nearly a quarter-million Americans, soldiers and citizens, are living or visiting every day.[82] "A protracted conflict," the report continues, "particularly one in which North Korea uses its nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons—could cause enormous casualties on a greater scale, and might expand to include Japan and U.S. territories in the region."[83]

When the Clinton administration considered military action in 1994, it predicted as many as one million casualties in the larger conflict.[84] Ashton Carter, who as assistant secretary of defense helped prepare the Clinton plan, said, "the loss of life in that war—God forbid that kind of war ever starts on the Korean Peninsula—loss of life is horrific."[85] In *Foreign Policy* magazine, a military war gamer who prepared conflict scenarios for the Pentagon explained that the U.S. armed services "expect a massive humanitarian crisis, enormous loss of life, and economic disaster."[86]

A single 100-kiloton nuclear weapon dropped on a major city could kill hundreds of thousands of people.[87] Many estimates for a Second Korean War go into the millions.[88] Adm. Michael J. Dumont, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, observed: "Invading North Korea could result in a catastrophic loss of lives for U.S. troops and U.S. civilians in South Korea. It could kill millions of South Koreans and put troops and civilians in Guam and Japan at risk."[89] Victor Cha has also warned of "millions of casualties."[90]

One worst-case analysis from the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* projected potentially 2.5 million deaths and 6.9 million injuries of varying severity.[91] A nuclear attack on Seoul and Tokyo could result in as many as 2.1 million deaths and 7.7 million injuries. If the bombs were thermonuclear, the death toll would be even higher.[92] One war game that considered nukes hitting the American homeland estimated 8 million deaths.[93]

The economic costs of conflict also would be colossal, reaching into the hundreds of billions or trillions of dollars and would extend well beyond the Korean Peninsula. Washington would face extraordinary pressure to underwrite occupation and finance reconstruction across the entire battle zone. The postconflict expense of reconstructing North and South Korea, along with other possible targets—Japan and Guam, for instance—would be enormous.[94] Occupying and rebuilding a devastated North Korea and combatting any insurgency would be far more difficult than in Iraq and Afghanistan, where U.S. troop levels peaked at 170,000 and 100,000, respectively. Those two operations together cost almost $5 trillion.[95]

The bottom line is that any war is likely to escalate to cataclysmic proportions. In September, President Trump warned that if

"Any war is likely to escalate to cataclysmic proportions."

> "The regime might seek to preempt what it believes to be an imminent U.S. attack."

the United States attacks the DPRK," it will be a very sad day for North Korea."[96] That is true, but not only for North Korea.

THREATENING WAR AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR GOING TO WAR

Are President Trump's warnings justified as an attempt to intimidate the Kim government?[97] Threatening war is better than triggering war, but the first could lead to the second. Backing a proposal to negotiate with the threat of force makes negotiation more likely, at least in theory, but if that is the present administration's strategy, it risks misfiring badly. First, the president has often undercut the efforts of his own officials to promote negotiation.[98] Second, his casual talk of war has heightened tensions and increased the prospect of conflict. Warned Condoleezza Rice: "I can remember in crisis after crisis, your rhetoric gets hotter and hotter, escalates more and more and more. Really, it just puts an environment around the problem [that makes it] hard to get it solved."[99]

The president's foreign policy views and willingness to use military force remain ambiguous if not mysterious more than a year into his presidency. That makes it more difficult for other governments, including Pyongyang, to discern his intentions, understand his rhetoric, and predict his actions. None of Trump's predecessors, including President Clinton, who actually considered a preventive strike, threatened war as explicitly as Trump has. Pyongyang may therefore view an American attack as being a much greater possibility today. In that case, the North is likely to be much more sensitive to any military moves that might be a prelude to such a strike, such as bolstering existing U.S. forces and evacuating civilians.[100]

Belief that Washington is ready to strike would influence how the DPRK responds to individual U.S. military moves, short of an actual attack, that it finds threatening. Two years ago, Pyongyang asserted that "the right to nuclear preemptive attack is by no means the U.S. monopoly."[101] North Korean foreign minister Ri Yong-ho said in September: "Since the United States declared war on our country, we will have every right to make countermeasures, including the right to shoot down United States strategic bombers even when they are not inside the airspace border of our country."[102] Because North Korean units are reportedly authorized to respond to attack without orders from Pyongyang, even a mistaken DPRK response to a presumed threat could trigger American or South Korean retaliation (or both) and quickly spiral into full-scale war.

More broadly, given North Korea's military vulnerability and Washington's obvious incentive to seek and destroy Pyongyang's weapons as part of any attack, the DPRK could—and arguably should, if it is acting in its perceived interest—adopt a "use it or lose it" approach. The regime might seek to preempt what it believes to be an imminent U.S. attack, starting a war that neither nation, let alone South Korea and neighboring states, desired.[103] While the North is likely to lose in any case, waiting for the United States to build up its conventional forces and launch a concentrated bombing campaign would guarantee a speedier defeat. The first Gulf War serves as an illustrative example to an adversary like North Korea of the importance of preempting expected U.S. military action.[104] Not only have rapid deployment capabilities advanced considerably since 1991, but also the United States is postured in Northeast Asia in such a way as to make North Korea more vulnerable than Iraq was. "The base infrastructure in the region and the accessibility of North Korea from the sea should make it possible to generate around 4,000 sorties a day compared to the 800 a day that were so effective in Iraq," write former CIA director James Woolsey and retired U.S. Air Force general Thomas McInerney. "We must be prepared to win a war, not execute a strike," they contend.[105]

The president's bluster has also undercut Washington's relationship with the ROK. South Koreans say they are used to the North's over-the-top rhetoric but expect U.S. policy to be measured and responsible. The Moon

government has been devoting substantial effort to convincing its people that the Trump administration will not act without its approval, which may or may not be true.[106]

However, President Trump has not confirmed that he would limit his options to satisfy America's allies, and other officials insist that U.S. interests are paramount, irrespective of the costs to others, including South Koreans. Should Seoul perceive that the United States is moving toward a preventive strike, allied dissension could disrupt American military efforts, especially if Washington intends to use ROK bases. In fact, Pyongyang's recent gambit at the 2018 Winter Olympics was an effort to drive a wedge between the allies. The move was mainly directed at Seoul, not Washington, though the DPRK was reportedly prepared to meet with Vice President Mike Pence. That meeting did not occur and, if reports are accurate, would have been of little use since the vice president merely planned to reaffirm Washington's maximalist demand for denuclearization.

ALTERNATIVE POLICY OPTIONS

The Trump administration and the Kim regime are on a collision course. North Korea believes a deliverable nuclear weapon is the only sure guarantee for regime preservation. However, as former national security adviser H. R. McMaster said, "Kim Jong-un should recognize that if he thinks the development of this nuclear capability is keeping him safer, it's actually the opposite."[107] Observers increasingly fear the administration is serious about its threats of war.

There remain alternatives. None are perfect, but all are preferable to starting a conflict.

The administration's priority should be de-escalating the current crisis. The North's past offer, backed by China, to freeze missile and nuclear testing in exchange for suspending joint U.S.-ROK military exercises would break the cycle of increasing North Korean tests and American threats.[108] Reducing tensions, as well as the frightened urgency that has dominated public debate of the issue, is essential. However useful the exercises might be, they are not as important as moving the potential belligerents back from the brink.

The United States should maintain sanctions on the Kim regime to reduce its resources and push it toward the negotiating table. However, sanctions alone are unlikely to be sufficient. The historical experience with economic warfare is mixed, but generally negative.[109] In the case of North Korea, sanctions are even less likely to work. The regime, buttressed by Kim's ruthlessness, appears stable. Moreover, as noted earlier, it sees nuclear weapons as a tool of regime survival, the most important objective of the DPRK government, which means Pyongyang is willing to pay a high price to retain them.

Washington also should establish diplomatic contacts with Pyongyang. The initial process should be modest, though even that could pose a challenge for an administration that has lagged in staffing the State Department.[110] Communication with an adversary should not be seen as a reward. It would have been foolish not to talk to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Indeed, the more threatening the situation, the greater the need for contact. Dialogue would help reduce the North's sense of isolation and vulnerability, which has encouraged Pyongyang to prioritize its nuclear weapons development. In preparation for a Trump-Kim summit in May, the administration should craft an offer to the North involving a peace treaty, diplomatic recognition, security guarantees, and economic relief.

Along with an opening to the DPRK, the United States should hold serious discussions with China. To win stronger Chinese action against the North, Washington must address the PRC's concerns over having either a failed state next door or a reunified Korea, allied with America, and with U.S. troops on its border.[111] Possible confidence-building measures include offering aid for refugees, accepting possible Chinese military intervention in the aftermath of a North Korean collapse, and guaranteeing that U.S. forces would leave a reunited peninsula. Washington should also

"The administration's priority should be de-escalating the current crisis."

> "America's commitment to South Korea is more of a liability than a security asset."

seek Beijing's support for a U.S. peace offer to the North, along with a promise to impose harsher economic sanctions if Pyongyang rejects it.

Finally, Washington should reconsider both its conventional security guarantee and nuclear umbrella over South Korea. The need for the "mutual" defense treaty disappeared long ago, since South Korea can now carry the burden for its own defense and America's commitment to South Korea is more of a liability than a security asset.[112] The growing nuclear threat makes the alliance increasingly dangerous. Is this or any other administration really prepared to risk American cities to protect Seoul?[113] There are good reasons to support nonproliferation, but acquiescing to South Korea's development of its own nuclear deterrent may be in U.S. national security interests.[114] Seoul started down that path three decades ago, abandoning its program only under strong U.S. pressure. Today, two-thirds of South Koreans support obtaining nuclear weapons.[115] Moreover, the mere possibility of a South Korean (and Japanese) nuclear arsenal would likely spur China to do more.[116]

CONCLUSION

The United States has spent nearly 65 years attempting to prevent a rerun of the Korean War. It would be extremely foolish to deliberately reignite the same conflict today, especially when nonmilitary options have yet to be exhausted, a fact dramatically illustrated by the prospective Trump-Kim summit. Ironically, when I visited the ROK last year, several policymakers indicated that they were more concerned about the Trump administration starting a war than they were about the Kim regime starting one. They have spent decades living with North Korea's military threat, while relying on the United States to be the responsible party. This familiar arrangement no longer appears to prevail.

At least before the president agreed to meet the North Korean leader, McMaster had made conflict sound inevitable: President Trump "is not going to permit this rogue regime, Kim Jong-un, to threaten the United States with a nuclear weapon. So he is going to do anything necessary to prevent that from happening." Exactly what that would be went unstated, though McMaster said, "our military leaders are refining, improving plans every day."[117] That is, plans for war.

Preventive strikes are highly unlikely to end the North Korean threat at an acceptable cost. As the *Atlantic*'s Mark Bowden put it, "any effort to crush North Korea flirts not just with heavy losses, but with one of the greatest catastrophes in history."[118] America's losses likely would be in the tens of thousands. A nuclear strike on both Seoul and Tokyo could yield total casualties in the millions.

To trigger such a cataclysm in order to prevent an unlikely attack by a nation that can be contained and deterred would be, frankly, mad. The United States has dealt with similar challenges already. For decades, Washington confronted the Soviet Union, a far more dangerous power than North Korea. It did the same with the People's Republic of China, under dictator Mao Zedong (apparently even more unhinged than Kim), who cited his nation's large population as reason not to be concerned about the possibility of nuclear war. Washington considered preventive strikes in both instances but decided against that course.[119] Looking back, we should thank policymakers for taking the long path.

Former secretary of state Tillerson vowed that "diplomatic efforts will continue until the first bomb drops."[120] However, it is essential that the first bomb *not* drop. The Trump administration appears to be following the George W. Bush administration's misbegotten strategy in Iraq, only with less thought and preparation.[121] There are risks to containing and deterring North Korea, but they pale beside the costs of plunging the peninsula into the abyss of war. The United States has helped keep the peace in Northeast Asia for decades. Whether or not the hoped-for summit occurs, new thinking is essential to maintain that peace.

NOTES

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